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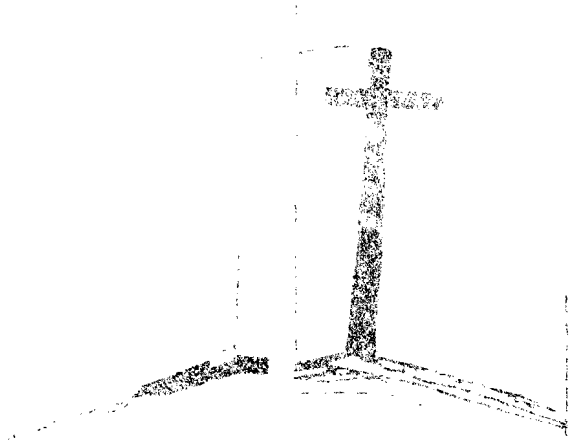

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.

—Hans Küng

In This Issue:

Can the Heathen Be Saved?

Volume 29, No. 2 **Leroy Garrett, Editor** **February, 1987**

The Sense of Scripture: Studies in Interpretation . . .

IS THE BIBLE TO BE TAKEN LITERALLY?
(Or Common Sense Hermeneutics)

It is an odd question, come to think about it. I am not sure that such a question is asked about any other book. Whether it be a novel, a work of history, a biography, or a typical textbook, no one ever asks if it is to be taken literally. You would think it strange if someone asked you as you opened a letter from a friend, *Will you take it literally?*

A suitable answer would seem to be, regardless of the nature of the book or document, *I will take it for what it says.* It may not always be easy to determine what is meant by what is said, but that remains the intent of the reader, to ascertain the meaning. To speak of taking a document literally may even evoke suspicion. It could lead one to respond with something like, "Oh, you think my friend may be on some poetic binge and has sprinkled her letter with symbols." If there is any likelihood of that one might add, "If so, I'll probably be able to figure out what she's getting at." If she should say in her letter, "That old fox of a professor that I told you about is still on my back," he would know what she meant. He certainly would not conclude that her professor had four legs and a furry tail and now and again rode astride her as she made her way across the campus. He would give no thought to whether he was interpreting literally or figuratively, unless someone raised the question. He would simply be interpreting, period.

This is to say when we read anything we read it like we read anything else, allowing of course for such differences as prose and poetry, and if we gave our method a name we might call it common sense. *Whatever I read I read it with common sense* sounds like a rule that would bear us through all our literary pursuits. Except the Bible. When it comes to the Bible we treat it as a book apart, as if it is to be interpreted differently from other books. To be sure, we have a different *attitude* toward the Bible, for we believe it is the only book that is holy Scripture, but a different attitude does not call for a different way of interpreting.

One basic rule of hermeneutics that Alexander Campbell gave to the church on the American frontier was within this context: *the same laws of*

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interpretation which are applied to the language of other books are to be applied to the language of the Bible. (Christian System, p. 4) Campbell believed that this one rule would liberate the Bible from the hands of the clergy, who presumed themselves to be the only true interpreters, and once again place it in the hands of the people. Along with hermeneutical principles Campbell presented to the public a fresh translation of the New Testament called *The Living Oracles.*

An amusing anecdote reveals how Campbell considered this. Noting a theologian's use of Jn. 11:28 where Martha calls to her sister and says, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you," in which he found such weighty Calvinistic notions as the incarnation and the effectual call. Campbell called to him a child playing outside his study door and read the passage to her in context, asking her what it said. The child replied that it is saying that one sister (Martha) is telling the other sister (Mary) that Jesus had arrived and wanted to see her, simply that.

Campbell saw the theologian as muddying the water with "mystical" interpretation and sheer nonsense, while the child in her simplicity applied common sense and thus read aright.

An honest approach to Scripture and the application of sound practical judgment will do more to make sense of the Bible than all the complex rules one may list. Rules have their place and we will be listing some of them, but let us insist at the outset that a responsible handling of Scripture begins with plain horse sense. It is not going too far to say that one should interpret the Bible the same way he does his daily newspaper. Such as a headline that appeared in our local paper, "TCU Too Much for SMU." By lifting it from its context in a superficial way that might be made to mean that TCU is a far better university than SMU and SMU has given up hope of catching up. But when one takes note that the headline appeared on the sports page and that the context tells of how TCU has defeated SMU in eight straight basketball games there is no question as to its meaning.

That is how we are to make sense of the Bible. A passage is to be seen in terms of where it is found in the Bible, its historical situation, who is speaking and to whom and why, the type of literature, and other such considerations. But all this spells common sense. All this comes by an honest application of the mind to the passage. When Sir Isaac Newton was asked how he had learned so much about science, his answer was both simple and profound, *By applying my mind to it.* That is what a common sense, no nonsense study of the Bible is all about.

I do not intend to make it simpler than it is. Much of the Bible is difficult to understand, but I am persuaded that 90% of the Bible can be understood well enough by a reasonable application of the ordinary rules of

interpretation. To concede that literature is difficult is not to say that it is incomprehensible. Through diligence we can understand what is difficult.

Clearly, there are passages in the Bible the meaning of which we may never know for sure. Take Paul's qualification for an elder that he be "married only once" or "the husband of one wife," depending on how it is translated. The *probable* meaning is not that he has to be married as many suppose, but that he is not to be a digamist, one who marries after the death of his wife, a matter that was deemed important in Paul's time. But we cannot be sure what it means, and so we must leave such questions open and not be dogmatic.

And some passages may forever be obscure, such as "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" in 2 Tim. 3:16. As a factual statement it is clear enough, that Scripture is inspired of God, but who knows what "God-breathed" (the Greek for inspiration) really means? There is no basis in the passage for any *theory* of inspiration, only the fact of it.

And some things in the Bible are so profound that we may spend a lifetime in study and never do more than scratch the surface, such as understanding the nature of Jesus Christ and of the kingdom of God.

While it is true that we use the Bible to interpret the Bible, there is more to it than that. Literacy in the Bible is necessary to a proper understanding of it, and this comes through years of study and it includes more than the Bible itself. In time one must gain some knowledge of geography, archaeology, textual criticism, and especially of history, as well as some appreciation of biblical languages. A good commentary can go far in providing such information.

And if we really do use our common sense we will know that a passage of Scripture can have only one meaning. We all often hear, "It may mean that but it also means the other." In a responsible approach to the Bible we must insist that the author *intended* but one meaning, whether he uses plain or symbolic language. Common sense dictates that no writer intended that his words convey two totally unrelated meanings. Yet we must be open to the likelihood that God intends a deeper meaning than was in the mind of the writer, but not a different meaning. So this question must be ever before us: *what was in the mind of the writer, and what deeper meaning was in the mind of God?*

If we are conscious of this question we are less likely to succumb to a damaging error — modernizing the Bible by lifting it out of its ancient, historical context, and along with it modernizing Jesus by separating him from his Jewish roots. We must remember that the inspired writers wrote in a language and culture far different from our own. They were not writing to us but to the people of their time, and it was their responsibility to be understood by them and not by us. While what they wrote centuries

ago has meaning for us, it was not their intention to communicate to us, and so we have a great distance of time, culture, and history between us. So, another common sense rule is: *there is no substitute for educated effort in making sense of the Bible.*

This appeal for a common sense hermeneutics may be better appreciated when one realizes that the Common Sense school of philosophy, which had its home in 18th century Scotland, greatly influenced our own history in the thinking of Thomas and Alexander Campbell. The Campbells were influenced by the likes of Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid to challenge the mystical, theoretical approach to Scripture, which was common on the American frontier, with a common sense approach. This meant in essence that one's senses can be trusted to interpret the world as it really is. Common Sense thinkers insisted that all knowledge is reduced to what the mind perceives through its senses.

And no specialized training or knowledge is necessary to perceive the reality of objects. The Common Sense school questioned "mystical" knowledge, and they would not accept any "theory" about truth or reality if their consequences were condemned by an appeal to common sense. For instance, Platonists have argued for centuries that reality is in "ideas" rather than objects, which only reflect the ideas. It is the idea of "sweetness" that is real, not sweet things like honey. Common Sense philosophers called this nonsense, insisting that there is no such thing as "sweetness" except in sweet things. A Platonist would even find the "idea" of football as a reality distinct from the actual game played on the field, which is but a shadow of what is real. And so with all ideas. Common Sense thinkers brand this as absurd, for there can be no game of football apart from flesh and blood football players.

When the difference between these ways of thinking is applied to the Bible the result is amazing. It caused the Campbells to question "theoretical" and "experimental" religion, and even theology itself, for the systems of theology assumed more than the *facts* of Scripture allowed. Such as the doctrine of the Trinity, which our pioneers rejected. Trinitarian doctrines usually add up to more than what the Bible actually says about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Influenced by John Locke, a British philosopher who laid some of the groundwork for the Scottish school of Common Sense, Alexander Campbell contended that the Bible is a record of facts, *historical* facts, and are to be understood by the ordinary application of the mind. Common sense! A fact is no theory, supposition, or opinion, but, as Locke put it, *something said or done.* In the Bible God and his chosen envoys are always doing things and saying things. Things said, things done. All

understandable, perhaps difficult sometimes, but nonetheless understandable, most of the time at least.

All this is really a *literal* interpretation of the Bible, if that is the word to use, just as any other book or document of facts would be interpreted literally. A *natural* interpretation might be a better word. This allows for the occasional mystical, symbolic, or figurative language that occurs in all literature. When Jesus says, "He who drinks the water that I give will never thirst," we have a clearly-stated fact (something said), and while it contains mystical or symbolic language the meaning is clear enough. And we do not have to belabor the fact that there is symbolic language. Still we have in this statement from our Lord what is often true of the Bible: it is both simple and profound; it is understandable and yet beyond our understanding. We can spend a lifetime delving into the mystery of drinking the water that Jesus gives and pondering what it means never to be thirsty. *—the Editor*

IF WE BELIEVE THESE FIVE THINGS . . .

". . . those things which are most surely believed among us." — Lk. 1:1

To describe the way our world is thinking today one may need to revive that old philsophical term *nihilism.* Whether it is terrorism or drug abuse on one hand or teenage suicides or record-breaking abortions on the other, nihilism says it all. Philosophers use that term to identify those who see no meaning or purpose in life and who insist that there is no basis for truth. Nihilism generally rejects all standards of ethics and religion. As the term itself suggests, the nihilist sees *nothing* in life of any lasting value.

In dealing with our nihilistic world it may be too much to begin with the claims of Christ. We might better begin with the proposition that there is such a thing as truth. We have one crucial advantage in our efforts to witness to an unbelieving world, which is that there is in everyone's inner-self an instinct to believe in ultimate reality. Man has to resist his own inner struggle to "grope after God" who is "not far from anyone of us," as Paul puts it. And Jn. 1:9 assures us "That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world." Our advantage is that that light which God has given to everyone is endeavoring to break through the clouds of despair and desperation.

Herein are listed a starting-point in dealing with those who have lost hope and find life meaningless. If we can believe these five things they will

turn our lives around, and they may be as relevant to those so-called "believers" in the church who often live as if they too were nihilists. These five ideas may be thought of as axioms in that the very stating of them tends to establish them as truth. As axioms they are self-authenticating and need not be proved. They are to be contemplated rather than argued. The mind that is bent on disbelief is disclined to give them serious consideration. As darkness cannot apprehend light so the nihilistic mind cannot resist these axioms and still be an honest, searching mind. Even believers will find their values challenged as they weigh the significance of these five truths.

1. *There is a divine Intelligence behind our universe.*

The person who concedes that there is a mind behind such a mechanism as a watch is compelled by logic to grant that there is a Mind behind the mind that made the watch. If it is granted that there is intelligence in the world, must it not also be granted that there is some Intelligence behind the intelligence? Can intelligence come from nothing? We all recognize that we live in an *ordered* universe. How then can we say this order has no meaning behind it, no Mind, no purpose, nothing? In the light of both nature and reason it is much easier to believe that there is *something* behind our mysterious universe than *nothing.* How can anyone with a sound mind believe that something can come out of nothing?

2. *This divine Intelligence is benevolent rather than malevolent.*

Despite such evils as pestilences, famines, floods, and earthquakes, the overwhelming evidence is that the divine Intelligence is good. The pagans who heard Paul on Mars Hill in Athens could not dispute that "Somebody" or "Something" gave them "life, breath, and all things." Nor could those who heard Jesus deny that "He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." The divine Intelligence is for us and not against us. We can order our lives in an ordered universe, and so we can plant and reap, work and eat, love and be loved. The rankest nihilist lives in a universe he can trust. He believes that gravity will not fail him and that he will have air to breathe. We all have more blessings than we count. Is there no One to thank for all our bounties? Is it not evident that a tyrant does not rule in the affairs of men? Amidst all the goodness in the world are we to say there is no Good (God) behind it?

3. *This divine Intelligence has a purpose for the universe and for all his creation, including mankind.*

Even when the purpose or purposes are not clearly defined, it is evident that the Good (God) is up to something. We are not on a runaway train headed nowhere. Whether in the lowliest insect or the mightiest star it is evident that some purpose is at work and some end in view. Moreover

the purpose appears to be moral. Problems can be solved, things can be made better. When we cooperate with God we can both improve ourselves and the world in which we live. Just as we have a purpose in the lives of our children, it is evident that God has a purpose for us. We seem to have an innate sense that it is right for us to improve ourselves and our world. We all have rather strong views of what is right and wrong, just and unjust. No one tries to defend child abuse, for example.

4. *This divine Intelligence reveals itself in various ways.*

Not only does God have a purpose and a will but he reveals himself in this regard. It is very difficult to believe that the Creator would create man and then leave him to flounder in darkness and confusion, ignorant of any purpose in life. Only a demon would do such as that. If God would reveal himself, which is ever so evident, it is reasonable that he would do so through writing by way of human instrumentality, as well as through nature. That he would reveal himself ultimately through a Person is the glorious dimension of his desire for self-disclosure.

5. *This purposive, benevolent, self-disclosing Intelligence will ultimately be victorious in all his intentions for man and the universe.*

It is inconceivable that God can be defeated. His purposes will all be realized. If the Scriptures see him as seated on a heavenly throne and declaring, "Behold, I make all things new," then we can believe there will be new heavens and a new earth wherein righteousness will dwell. God will make good on all his promises. The evil forces in the universe may appear to be the winners, and man, when he refuses to cooperate with God's will, may seem to frustrate God's purposes. But such defeat of God, if it can be called that, is only temporary. He sees to it that Shakespeare's cry of woe about human life will not obtain: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing," which is a poetic definition of nihilism. Since God *is* life cannot be meaningless and nihilism cannot be true. As for the ultimate victory of God's purposes for the universe and for us all the poet James Russell Lowell said it well in his *The Present Crisis:*

> Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne
> Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
> Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own

If these five things can be "most surely believed," then life will not be "like a tale that is told" (Ps. 90:9) or like a tale told by a fool, but something beautiful and meaningful. And if we really believe these things we will keep our priorities straight, and we will overcome man's most devastating fallacy, the notion that life is a matter of getting and having, and that the chief values are fame, pleasure and position.

In bearing testimony to these five truths we have still one more great advantage: *down deep inside every person wants to believe these evident truths.* Without them life makes no sense, and we are lost at sea with neither rudder nor compass.

Our nihilistic world is blinded to the beautiful testimony of the simplest things of life. When Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote these glorious lines about a humble flower, he bore witness to the five truths set forth above.

> Flower in the crannied wall,
> I pluck you out of the crannies,
> I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
> Little flower — but *if* I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.

—the Editor

Is Faith Belief in Doctrines?

CAN THE HEATHEN BE SAVED?

How about those who lived and died from Adam to Christ? How about all those through the ages who were not Hebrews? What did they have to do to gain eternal life? Were they without hope because they were not Abraham's seed? — Benton, Arkansas

These questions, which surely disturb the mind of every Christian at one time or another (Were the poor American Indians, who had no opportunity to know Christ, all lost?), are best answered by raising still another question, *Is faith a matter of believing particular doctrines?* The particulars may run all the way from whether an instrument may accompany the singing in Christian worship and whether the Scriptures are inerrantly inspired to the virgin birth of Christ and the resurrection of the body. Does faith consist in belief of such doctrines, or does faith sometimes include an acceptance of such doctrines? Do such doctrines grow out of faith or are they by definition the meaning of faith?

I submit the view that faith is not as much a matter of mind (an intellectual acceptance of doctrinal propositions) as it is a matter of heart.

Rom. 10:10 indicates this: "With the heart one believes unto righteousness." This cannot be a faith with meritorious efficacy — such as believing the right things or even in the right Person — for righteousness is given only by God's grace. Neither faith nor works can merit salvation. So declares the apostle in Rom. 3:28: "We conclude that one is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." Here "the deeds of the law" are all those works that the law enjoins, to be performed perfectly as the law requires. Just as one cannot be justified by a perfect response to law, so one cannot be justified by believing the right doctrines. Faith is something besides all this.

The faith that justifies in Rom. 3:28 cannot be a belief in right doctrines, for such faith would be no different from law. Only God's graciousness can make us right with him, not perfect lawkeeping or perfect doctrine. When we see faith as "a sincere disposition to believe what God hath made known," to quote MacKnight, we can better understand Paul's message in Romans. The apostle does plainly say in Rom. 2:13 that "the doers of the law will be justified," which appears to contradict his insistence that "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). We can only conclude that "the law" that justifies in Rom. 2:13 is different from the law of works in Rom. 3:20.

The problem is resolved by understanding that the law that justifies in Rom. 2:13 is "the law of faith" in Rom. 3:27. That verse shows that being right with God cannot be a matter of our boasting — that we are neither good enough or right enough to merit salvation. It is neither by deeds of any law or by a right understanding (faith) of any set of doctrines that justifies us. It is by faith or "the law of faith." Faith in this context means a sincere seeking after God, a humble, obedient spirit in the face of God's will as one understands that will. We also have the apostle referring to "the spirit of faith" (2 Cor. 4:13).

I suggest that we have an answer to the above questions when we understand the meaning of "the spirit of faith." In that verse Paul quotes from Psalms 116 where David amidst all his affliction could still say, "I believed therefore I spoke." The essence of faith in that psalm is "I will call upon God as long as I live" (verse 2), which is a good definition of "the spirit of faith." The spirit of faith may be in one who does not have a covenant relationship with God as the Jews had and as Christians now have. The American Indian, ignorant of God in terms of the revelation we have, might nonetheless call upon God, according to the light he has, as long as he lives. And that psalm promises that when one calls upon God in the spirit of faith God inclines His ear unto him.

Since God is no respecter of persons and since "in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35), we may conclude that there are those among the heathen who have this spirit of

faith. We may conclude that fearing God and working righteousness in this passage is the same as "the doers of the law" in Rom. 2:13. Or it may be called "the law of faith" that saves.

But the *object* of that faith may be different, depending on circumstances. By the circumstances of birth the Jewish people were given a special revelation, "the law," and by circumstance of birth most of us in the Western world know about Christ. The object of faith for the American Indian or an Indonesian villager may be what he sees in the testimony of nature or in the witness of his own heart. He has never heard of Christ and he is not a recipient of "the law." But even if the object, by circumstance, is different there can be the same "spirit of faith." The Scriptures teach that God accepts the person from any nation or any tongue that calls upon Him in sincere faith, who fears him and does what is right ("the law" such as he has in nature) according to the light he has.

Does not the apostle say this in Rom. 2:14: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts." What do we know, we who are blessed with an abundance of revelation in the form of the Holy Scriptures, about the law that is written on human hearts? In that passage the apostle goes on to say that "their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them." The law within, the conscience, may *accuse* or *excuse*, depending on whether or not one has "the spirit of faith" that seeks after the God that he may know little about.

Is this not evident in the story of Abram of the Chaldees, whose faith was imputed unto him for righteousness? He knew little about the God that he believed in. He certainly had neither law nor Scripture. He was in a world of heathenism, but he believed in the One who called him, and "it was reckoned unto him for righteousness." Then there is Rahab, who was not only a heathen but a prostitute as well, but still Heb. 11:31 assures us that "By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace."

In Acts 14:16 Paul acknowledges that in bygone generations God allowed the nations to walk in their own ways ("times of ignorance" he calls it in Acts 17:30), and yet he says even of those times: "Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

If God has never left himself without witness, whether to a Taiwanese peasant or an Alaskan Eskimo, we only need to ask if there are not some who respond to that witness. Paul gives us the answer in Acts 17:26-27:

> He made of one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.

Seek the Lord and grope after him! This is the essence of religion and it is the essence of faith. Men find God by seeking him. This is "the spirit of faith," even when it lacks those doctrines that we believe only because we have greater light.

This view of faith will save us from the serious error of supposing that we are "faithful" because we believe all the right doctrines, even the right doctrines about Christ. Believing even in the resurrection of Christ does not make us faithful. We believe in the resurrection because we are faithful. We are faithful only when we seek after God with all our hearts. All who do that are "acceptable to him," as the Bible puts it, even if they are not yet Jews (Old Testament) or Christians (New Testament). When we "grope after him in hopes that we might find him" God puts us on radar and brings us in for a safe landing, even if it is ever so slowly. But we are all at different positions on the radar screen, and what is important, even if we are already baptized into Christ and a "good" Christian, is that we keep seeking him with sincere hearts. Seeking after God and finding him does not end when we reach a particular plateau. It involves eternity itself, for even when we see God face to face he will still be the God who hides himself. We will seek him in faith, hope, and love throughout eternity, as 1 Cor. 13:13 indicates.

To use such imagery as God having people on radar who have the spirit of faith may be consistent with the vision Paul experienced in Corinth, according to Acts 18:9-10: "Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you, for I have many people in this city.' "

There were "many people" in Corinth who were seeking after God or who had the spirit of faith, even though they were pagans, and the Lord wanted them to hear the gospel from his apostle. He wanted to bring them further. But we can hardly conclude that they would have been lost in hell had they not heard the gospel. The Lord would hardly refer to them as "my people" and yet consider them as within Satan's domain. Everyone in Corinth was not so described, but many of them were in some special way "my people," even though they were not yet Christians and did not yet enjoy a covenant relationship with God. May we not conclude that those that did not get to hear Paul and obey the gospel were still God's people?

In his resourceful book, *The Church*, the brilliant Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng deals with this question of whether the heathen can be saved by quoting from a decision reached in Vatican II. The quotation deserves our consideration:

> Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. (p. 316)

In this context the Vatican council drew upon Acts 17:25-28, and stressed the fact that God gives life, breath, and every other gift to all men, and that it is in him that we live and move and have our very being, and that he is not far from any of us. The divines also saw significance in 1 Tim. 2:4, which assures us that God wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

We may conclude with an important distinction: *the Scriptures never condemn an unbeliever; they condemn only the disbeliever.* There is a vast difference between the person who does not believe because he has never heard and the one who has heard and has rejected the message. Jesus may have had such a distinction in mind when he said; "If I had not come and spoken to them they would not have had sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John 15:22).

But it is here that both the world and the church are in deep trouble: *there is so much disbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence, both in nature and in Scripture.* The church is not immune to this the greatest of sins. Disbelief is the church's besetting sin (Heb. 12:1). But whenever one in the world or in the church sincerely seeks after God and hungers and thirsts for righteousness we believe he will find God and be accepted by God. So says the Scriptures: "To this one will I look, declares the Lord, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Is. 66:2). — *the Editor*

I do not think that a resolute dealing with our divisions will come except in the context of a quite new acceptance on the part of all the Churches of the obligatoin to bring the gospel to every creature; nor do I think that the world will believe that Gospel until it sees more evidence of its power to make us one. These two tasks — mission and unity — must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation to one another. — *Leslie Newbigin*

HAVE WE RUN OUT OF STEAM?

by W. Carl Ketcherside

Sometimes I wonder about Samson. He was one of the weakest men morally and one of the strongest physically of any man who ever lived. He could sleep with a Philistine harlot, or carry off the gates and bars of a Philistine city with the same gusto. The tragedy of his life was his association with the temptress, Delilah. He lied to her as she lied to him, until finally she wormed out of him the secret of his strength. He was sleeping with his head upon her knees when she cried out "The Philistines are upon you, Samson." He awakened and said, half to himself, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But the Book says, "And he did not know the Lord had left him." He was kind of childish in his powerlessness.

It is then I am reminded of the people of God whom he has called. After many acts of divine daring they become entangled with the affairs of this life. They are asleep in the lap of the world. Finally, summoned from their stupor they try to shake themselves free as at other times in the past only to discover that God has withdrawn his power. One of the saddest things ever spoken about some who will come in the time of stress in the last days is that they will "Hold the form of religion but deny the power of it." Like an embalmed corpse the life and energy have fled. Like a petrified tree no fruit is borne. They are called men of corrupt minds and counterfeit faith. They are accused of being lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Without being meddlesome or unjustly accusative I think we can see the condition described prevalent upon every side today. In our preaching we lash out at the symptoms. We treat the infection by picking away at the pimples. But there is a deep inflammation which cannot be administered to on the surface. It is the result of the loss of the power of the Spirit. Until it is remedied nothing else will avail. What has happened, of course, is what always happens. We have identified the faith with the culture. It happened in Rome. It happened in Russia. It happened in England. Now it has happened in the United States.

God is the chief deity for white middle-class Americans. He almost became the tutelar divinity of *upper* middle-class America, but the current recession, depression, or whatever it was, coupled with runaway inflation and high interest rates, knocked the "upper" off the designation. It was in the inhabitants of Indian villages whose land we were stealing, and placed black human beings on the auction block and sold them like cattle, into slavery which was sometimes worse than death. It is in the name of God that we still resent refugees from Vietnam, whose daughters American

soldiers violated, worshiping at the same table with us. "Let them form their own church" is our self-righteous cry. And we think it strange that the body is paralyzed, impotent, unable to grow. It is a strange wonder it has endured as long as it has with its make-believe faith.

Recently I have gone over the names of some of our "tribal heroes" who were in the minds of all in the 1950 era. Wherever you went men were telling of their exploits in debate. Brethren would sit on the front porch and guffaw as they recounted their quick sallies at some of the Baptists or Mormons who signed propositions. But you do not hear of them any more. They have vanished into the thin air of yesteryear. They have folded their tents like the Arabs and as silently stolen away. Some are still alive. They are no more in demand. Those who place them on their programs speak apologetically about owing them a little recognition because of the past. Once they were our party dragons, breathing out fire and smoke. Now they are seen to be mere crocodiles sleeping in the mud along the river. And the Baptists and Mormons are still growing greater in number.

What has happened to write "Ichabod" over our lintels? We have run out of steam. And the reason is we denied the impetus and energy of the Holy Spirit. We have manufactured preachers wholly incapable of moving out into our kind of world. We have taught them to mechanically recite scripture by the page. We have given them the clever answers to make to Methodists and Pentecostals on some disputed point. In some cases we have converted them into robots, vainly repeating the sermon outlines they have inherited from professors, some of whom are still teaching from sets of notes they have used without alteration or change for twenty years. And we have sent them forth starry-eyed into congregations where the elders are engaged in power struggles, the members hardly speak to each other, and the community laughs at them behind their backs.

I grew up in a small segment of "the restoration movement." The Apostolic Review was our link with one another. It was next to the Bible. Our enemies were the Gospel Advocate and Firm Foundation. Our particular version of "the Church of Christ" was the kingdom of heaven. Others were outside the pale. They were digressive, factionalists, disloyal, usurpers, and guilty of heresy. We were "the faithful" in spite of some of the moral lapses which occurred. Now I find myself grieved that I was betrayed by the party spirit. We were sure that if Paul came to our town, he would pass everyone else by and worship with us. I am no longer sure he would even have come to our town if his donkey had become lame at the city limits.

I resent the fact that I was kept confined and unable to share the concepts of friends and neighbors, some of whom led lives which were a credit to those with whom we met each Sunday. It has become difficult to

overcome the retardation I suffered by our attitude. But chiefly I resent the false propaganda to which I was subjected about the Holy Spirit. I grew up with the idea that the Spirit was "the word." A hundred times I have heard John 6:63 quoted. And a hundred times I have heard it misconstrued and misapplied. "It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit and life." In our naiveté every time we see the word "spirit" we think of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was simply affirming that the words He spoke were spiritual words producing life, in contrast with the manna (which was the subject of the chapter) which the fathers ate, digested and all died.

After I learned better about that, I was subjected to the idea that the Spirit operated only through the Word. If that is restricted to aliens from the kingdom, I agree that it is through the proclamation of the Good News. But I no longer believe it is true with the children of God. The Spirit even makes intercession for them with groanings which cannot even be uttered. The Spirit never violates the Word, but he is never trapped by it either. The fact is that the Spirit is not restricted or restrained by any idea, dogma, doctrine or concept of his work. But there is nothing to be gained from sitting around bemoaning the past. We would all do it differently if we had it to do over. But the time spent groaning about what has happened means that much less in which to make something happen in the future.

Jesus told the Sadducees that they were wrong because they knew neither the scriptures nor the power of God. He made a distinction between the two. I make the same distinction. Paul declared that he imparted the message in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. We conclude that the Spirit is the teacher and the words are the things taught. They are taught to those who possess the Spirit. It is high time for us to claim, accept and use the power of the Holy Spirit. Taking a purely negative position will do us no good. We will shrivel and die on the vine. Our efforts will become ineffective and unproductive.

Like the seventy we need authority over all the power of the enemy. If we go forth clad only in our own strength we will succumb. We are too weak, too frail, too human. It is only when we depend upon "the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left" that we shall be more than conquerors.

Man is not naturally a cynic; he wants pitifully to believe, in himself, in his future, in his community and in the nation in which he is a part. — *Louis Broomfield*

WHEN ARE FEELINGS RELIABLE?

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. — Mt. 7:21

In our day there has been a revival of emotional religion — or perhaps I should say emotion in religion — and that is probably good. To be sure, religion without heart and feeling is bad religion, just as much so as religion without reason is bad religion. If religion is to challenge the human intellect, such as dealing with such mystery as from whence man comes and whither he goes, it is also to touch the inmost springs of human feeling and bring forth praise, poetry, and song.

Is it not a matter of balance? And might not the balance be tilted more one way than the other, depending on how one is wired by nature. Some of us who are more high-strung and excitable by nature are likely to be more demonstrative in religious expression, while others of us are more phlegmatic and passive and are proned to be more composed in the way we "do" religion. Some people are naturally inclined to raise their hands and shout praises, while others are comfortable only in their quiet place in the pew.

If intoxicating spirits affect people differently, causing some to climb over furniture and shout expletives while others are moved only to sit quietly and muse, it should not surprise us if the Holy Spirit affects people differently, leading some to respond more extravagantly than others. And yet the more introverted person may have feelings that go as deep or even deeper than those of the more extroverted person. We sin against common sense when we expect everyone to behave alike, and we err in Christian grace when we demand that others respond to a given phenomenon the way we do. "There are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all" (1 Cor. 12:6). And we must take care lest we attribute everything to the Holy Spirit. Surely many of man's antics are no more than the expression of his emotions.

Once we give proper place to emotion in religion, we are wise to be on guard lest our feelings betray us. Experience teaches us that emotions are often beguiling and feelings frequently deceptive. Physicians now know that depression is as much biological as mental, if not more so. In fact it is depression that causes our "nerves," not the other way around. And we all know, whether with ourselves or with our children, that it is often diet and sleeping habits that make us cross and irritable rather than "something"

that happened at school or work. And emotions get all clogged up, for grief sometimes takes the form of fear, while love and hate are often intermingled. And who can always discern between jealousy and anger? It is enough to say that feelings cannot always be trusted.

The prophet Jeremiah was concerned with this kind of problem when he sought to distinguish between true and false prophecy. Some prophets confused their dreams (emotions?) with the word of God and thus practiced deceit. "Behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says' " (Jer. 23:31). How often we hear the radio and TV preachers say, "God told me thus and so"! Ideas can come into preachers' minds other than from God. It may only be their feelings of what they want God to say.

In regard to such boasting and such dreams Jeremiah says, "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully" (23:28). A prophet may tell a dream and a TV evangelist may express his feelings, but they are not to confuse that with what God has or has not said.

Jeremiah lays down the test as to what is truly God's word: "Is not My word like a fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (23:29). If a prophet's words are powerful and effective against the strongholds of sin, he can make a case that his message is from God. But that is different from telling a dream or asking for money.

But it is the Lord himself who gives us the sure test in distinguishing our feelings and instincts from the word of God, or between what we want and what God wants. He tells us in Mt. 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me. 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."

They cry out *Lord, Lord!*, and there you have emotion plain and simple. And how they can rev it up with *Lord, Lord!* They sometimes call it praising God. Jesus was not so impressed. He was impressed by obedience. To praise God with *Lord, Lord!* is appropriate when it springs from a heart set upon doing God's will.

Are our feelings reliable? Maybe so and maybe not. When emotion is the outpouring of an obedient will, then our feelings are reliable. Emotion is to be harnessed to wisdom, and again it is Jesus who tells us what wisdom is: "Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Mt. 7:24). The person who builds his life upon the rock of God's will has the right to feel good.

We can cry "Lord, Lord" right into hell unless we seek the wisdom of an obedient heart before God. Jesus came into this world so as to show us how to obey God. The key to true religion is obedience to God, first, last, and always. Feelings may deceive, but obedience to God's word never.

The psalmist puts it all together for us in Ps. 119:10: "With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments." When we are resolved in heart and mind to keep God's commandments and not to wander into sin, our feelings will take care of themselves. We will feel real good and we can praise him with our whole heart when we will the one thing in life that really matters to us, obeying the God that created us. — *the Editor*

OUR CHANGING WORLD

The Peak and Eastside Church of Christ is one of our oldest churches in Dallas, and it has responded to the changing demographic patterns in a creative way. It now has facilities for three separate assemblies representing different cultures. Recently they had a joint assembly conducted in three different languages, English, Spanish, and Khmer, which is probably a first among us. The church has an outreach program that is both inner-city and multi-lingual.

A growing number of Churches of Christ are joining the church at large at least to the extent that ministers from other denominations are being invited to share in our services and fill our pulpits, which until recently has almost never happened. We have had generations to grow up in our churches without ever hearing any minister except our own kind. Two churches in Tulsa, Southern Hills and Garnett Rd., now and again invite ministers from other churches, sometimes to preach, sometimes for a special program, and sometimes, as only recently at Garnett Rd., to tell how a church in the same city grew to 10,000 members. But it may be that our own church here in Denton, now known as Fellowship Church of Christ, is the first among us to have a visiting minister wearing a robe, as did the minister of Denton's First Presbyterian when he spoke to us on Christian unity Sunday, while our preacher spoke at a Presbyterian church. It is not at all uncommon these days for the "E" (more ecumenical as the directory classifies them) churches to invite other ministers. All indications are that our people love it, and they are finding out that ministers in other churches preach the Bible as well as we or better.

One "E" church, the Arcadia Church of Christ in Arcadia, California, may be dropped from the directory, for after wearing that name for many years it has decided to call itself Arcadia Christian Fellowship. But apparently only the name has changed and that in an effort to be less sectarian. In their latest bulletin they invited people to weekly communion and announced that Dr. Norvel Young would be speaking at the Temple City Church of Christ. So they are not far from the kingdom! But there is an unwritten law among us that a congregation will not be accepted as a Church of Christ unless it wears that name. Even if it changes to Church of God, which would be more scriptural (add up the prooftexts), it will be dropped from the Directory. And yet we tell the world that we are not a denomination!

The Fifth Restoration Forum is to be held at Cincinnati Bible Seminary April 28-30 and anyone interested may attend. Some 160 are already registered from Churches of Christ and over 100 from Christian Churches. These forums are an effort to

explore ways to know each other better and to work together more. Another is in the planning stage for next September, perhaps in Abilene. The fifth forum will be put in book form. If you are interested write to College Press, Box 1132, Joplin, MO 64801.

Abilene Christian University will be offering a program of study for the Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) degree this summer. It will require 24 hours of course work, all of which can be taken in summer, plus a thesis or some project. The main purpose of the program is "to enable ministers to be more responsive to the needs of the church." This will be ideal for our preachers who want to be a doctor of religion and be addressed as such. And it lays to rest any remaining doubt as to whether the Church of Christ has seminaries. Church of Christ preachers can now be doctors of ministry. That does belong in our "Changing World" column, doesn't it? All this may be well and good, but when, I ask again, are we going to lay aside the absurdity that we are not a denomination while all other churches are?

BOOK NOTES

It is encouraging that so many of our people want to know more about their heritage. For their benefit the following histories and biographies can be ordered from us: *Life of Elder John Smith* ($16.95); *The Gospel Restored* by Walter Scott ($14.95); *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* ($23.95); *Campbell-Rice Debate* ($21.95); *Raccoon John Smith* and *The Fool of God*, historical novels by Louis Cochran ($11.95), the latter being on the life of Alexander Campbell.

We have a super bargain on our bound volumes, five in number, which contain eight years of Restoration Review. Each volume is identified by its theme: *Principles of Unity and Fellowship* (1977); *The Ancient Order* (1978); *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* and *With All the Mind* (1979-80); *Jesus Today* (1981-82); *The Doe of the Dawn* (1983-84). A special price of $35.00 for all of them, postpaid. Separately the single volumes are $5.50 and the double volumes $10.50.

C. S. Lewis enthusiasts (some people snap up everything he has written) will be interested in a new publication, *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*. He wrote these letters in Latin to a Roman Catholic priest and beautifully express his gracious charm and wisdom. They are of course translated into English. $5.75 postpaid.

If ever a heart thirsted after God in prayer it was George Muller. You will learn what trust means by reading this man. *The George Muller Treasury* is a selection of his best stuff. $7.95 postpaid.

If we suppose the persecution of Christians belongs to ages past, Richard Wurmbrand's *Tortured for Christ* will inform us otherwise. It is a story that comes out of the Underground Church and Communist prisons. Three million readers have been touched by this unbelievable book. $5.75 postpaid.

If you want an informative, easy-to-read church history that covers the first several centuries, we highly recommend *A Short History of the Early Church* by Harry Boer. $6.95 postpaid.

Julia Staton's *What the Bible Says About Women* starts out by noting that the Bible says a great deal about women, and it goes on to tell the reader what this is and what it means to women and the church today. $13.50 postpaid.

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—Leslie Newbigin

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